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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IT](#) [EUN](#) [ITALIAN](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: EUROPEANS MAY BE FROM VENUS, BUT PRODI IS FROM NEPTUNE

Classified By: POL M/C TOM COUNTRYMAN, REASONS 1.5 (b, d)

1 (C) Summary: EU Commission President Romano Prodi demonstrated again March 27 why he rivals PM Berlusconi in polarizing Italian politics, this timewith an open letter outlining the center-left opposition's Iraq policy. The piece was vintage Prodi: convoluted and dense, it managed to favor both withdrawing Italy's 2700-man contingent from Iraq and continuing the deployment. In a nod to the panish Socialists, Prodi was clearly trying to use lingering opposition to Operation Iraqi Freedom to bolster support for Italy's ever-fractious center-left opposition in the run-up to June Euro-Parliament elections. Whether Prodi's position reflects his own tortured reasoning or an attempt to embrace the divergent positions on use of force, the result was clear as mud. Apart from his own conflict of interest in campaigning from Brussels, Prodi's latest gambit did make one thing clear to us: that the Berlusconi government remains a steadier partner than any possible successor government from the center-left. End Summary

Prodi's Bottom Lines: Bring Troops Home...

12. (C) Although he has still has a day job in Brussels, Romano Prodi seems to be running full-time for Italian Prime Minister (an election unlikely to occur before the end of 2005 at the earliest). Judging from the reactions to Prodi's open letter, one would think the leader of Italy's center-left commanded something beyond the loyalty of hard-core supporters (like, say, military units). But in a country where domestic political discourse often has more in common with opera, Prodi's "manifesto" was the equivalent of an aria -- loud, lengthy and kind of hard to understand.

13. (U) Prodi declared that a center-left government would:

-- draw inspiration from Italy's constitution on questions of international security;

-- never accept use of force if it served solely to resolve an international dispute or bring about regime change;

-- require UN authorization for virtually any military intervention.

Operation OIF was and remained illegitimate, Prodi argued, because it failed to obtain approval of the UN or any other international entity. A center-left government would not have participated in nor given its approval to OIF. By extension, the current "occupation" was a continuation of an unjustified and illegitimate war that was clearly incapable of restoring peace and security to Iraq. An Olive Tree Coalition would choose to bring Italian intervention to an end.

...unless, of course, they should stay

14. (U) Having declared an unequivocal bottom line, Prodi then changed keys. "These are not the terms in which the problem must be addressed." Because the Iraqi people were being exposed to disorder and constant terrorist threat, the international community's intervention was fully justified on humanitarian grounds. Moreover, a military element was necessary to help ensure its success. Such an intervention needed to be legitimized by a new UNSC resolution. Since a precipitate withdrawal would make the situation worse, Europe had to seize the opportunity to work more closely with the U.S. and establish an increasingly closer relationship in support of the UN. In this context, an immediate withdrawal of Italian troops would not make much sense.

15. (U) Prodi urged an immediate return to the "worldwide coalition against terrorism" that was forged after September 11. Terrorism was "the single most important threat to the free world since the Second World War." (Comment: We presume he skipped over Soviet imperialism to avoid offending the Olive Tree's red roots.) There was no alternative to credible military deterrence if one wants to preserve, guarantee, or impose the peace.

16. (U) Circling around to Europe, Prodi argued that European citizens wanted their leaders to craft a "tool" to extricate

them from current insecurity. If a European constitution was already in place, "we would already have been able to put in place a common army," but in its absence common defense and police cooperation activities were underway. A link-up among intelligence services is still to come.

17. (U) Reactions were strong and largely predictable. The

leaders of the center-left parties comprising the Olive Tree were supportive, though most appeared caught off-guard by Prodi's timing. Leaders within the Berlusconi government rejected Prodi's arguments; Deputy Prime Minister Fini lambasted Prodi for "playing double-games" and FM Frattini criticized his 'illegitimate' foray into Italian domestic politics. Perhaps the most telling critique came from European Affairs Minister Buttiglione: "I couldn't figure out Prodi's exact position on the issue."

Comment: Prodi's Conflicts of Interest

18. (C) Prodi's manifesto was his attempt to rally the faithful, and perhaps attract some swing support, by thumping on the "illegitimacy" of OIF and the current transition in Iraq. It's hard to tell if its opacity was a reflection of Prodi's own logic, the difficulty of trying to reconcile wildly divergent views among the center-left parties on legitimate use of force, or both. (We agree with many Italian commentators who believe that Prodi's nickname in the headlines - "The Professor" - reflects a deliberate campaign style of appearing eloquent and brilliant without actually saying anything). At this point, it's too early to tell if Prodi's manifesto will yield practical results in the June Euro-Parliament elections -- results the center-left would try to build on in the next national contest. But it demonstrates how difficult it would be for a center-left Italian government to grapple with the rapid, flexible responses and imaginative thinking required in the global war on terrorism. The mental gymnastics Prodi engages in -- trying to capture in theory the anti-war sentiments of his coalition while simultaneously advocating a more realistic set of criteria in practice -- are reminiscent of the last center-left government's agonizing over NATO's use of force in Kosovo. A center-left government wouldn't be disastrous -- it would be a reliable partner on a wide range of issues -- but it would complicate any operations or initiatives involving use of force.

19. (C) Not lost to some Italian journalists was the hypocrisy inherent in one of the strongest critics of Berlusconi's conflicts of interest openly trying to influence a member-state's internal politics while serving as Commission President. And, to be fair to the center-left as a whole, the leaders of the two largest parties (Democratic Left and Daisy) have described to the Ambassador a much more sophisticated position, a preference for keeping Italian troops in Iraq with an expanded mandate for the UN on the political side. Still, if Prodi's recent statements were to determine the actual policy of a center-left government, we'd better hope that the Berlusconi government succeeds in becoming the first postwar Italian government to serve out its entire term in office -- and is then reelected.

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